

VZCZCXRO9748
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1466/01 1660914
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 150914Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2389
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1369
RUEHXS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 001466

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [HUMANR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAM PLANS TO REGISTER A FEW PROTESTANTS, RELIGIOUS
LEADERS OPTIMISTIC BUT CONCERNED

REF: A) HANOI 1112; B) HCMC 588; C) HANOI 1113

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Although the GVN Religious Affairs authorities are non-committal about future Embassy visits to monitor religious freedom developments in the North, they have begun a pilot project for registering eight ethnic minority Protestant congregations in three provinces. In addition, they are educating local officials in fourteen provinces about the new framework on religion and the provinces are drafting plans to implement the regulations, especially in the area of house church registration. An EU team confirmed some of this information after a recent visit to Protestant villages in the Northwest, but reported that local officials continue to misunderstand some of their responsibilities. Hanoi Protestants also confirmed the GVN plans, but raised concerns that they are not able to train or assist local leaders in the registration process. They are nevertheless optimistic that the GVN will eventually register Protestant congregations across the North now that Vietnam is joining the WTO. A visit from Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford would help reinforce our efforts to encourage the GVN to allow other churches to train their own clergy and to assist congregations to rapidly organize, register and serve the needs of believers. End Summary.

Visits and religious-freedom reports may be postponed...

¶2. (SBU) On June 12, Poloff and Pol Assistants met with Dang Tai Tinh, Director of External Relations for the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). Poloff thanked Tinh for the CRA's recent successful efforts to convince the northern border provinces of Lao Cai and Ha Giang to receive a fact-finding trip from the Embassy team focusing on religious freedom and reiterated a request for similar assistance to visit Dien Bien Province as well as several other problem provinces in the highlands. Poloff also asked whether CRA will provide post with a previously promised province-by-province breakdown of GVN efforts to implement the new framework on religion.

¶4. (SBU) Tinh was non-committal about Dien Bien's recent refusal to accept an Embassy visit this June, noting that "many provinces face logistical problems organizing these visits." However, Dien Bien will likely suggest a more realistic schedule for the end of June or early July. (Note: We requested a visit to an Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) house church in Muong Nghe, the district infamous for beatings of Protestants, in our original suggested program. It is likely that fear of allowing such a visit was the real source of the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) "concern over logistics." End Note.) Tinh also stated that it will be some time before the CRA provides a province-by-province breakdown as requested. The GVN is only now in the process of implementing the ordinance at the local level and results will take time to collect and vet with higher

authorities before final collation.

...in the meantime: some training for cadres...

15. (SBU) Tinh reiterated standard points that the GVN has been working to improve local infrastructure and welfare in remote areas of the country, and noted that "while the central government cares for the economic and spiritual needs of the people, it also has to ensure the overall social stability of the country." To this end, the GVN has conducted training sessions to educate provincial and district officials from across the North about the new religious regulations so that they will "implement these policies in an orderly fashion." Over 300 local officials have attended these training classes in Hanoi and Hue. The CRA plans to hold a similar course in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) soon. In addition, the CRA trained over 600 provincial propaganda cadres to disseminate information on religion to the common people, he said.

...and for the clergy...

16. (SBU) Tinh further stated that the CRA has held training seminars for religious leaders. In April, 247 clergy participants from various religious groups attended a seminar in Hanoi. In May, 266 leaders attended a session in Hue and another 300 attended one in HCMC (REF B). The CRA is planning to organize more conferences and seminars for local officials and religious leaders in the coming months. Poloff asked whether public security officers have also participated in programs for local officials and religious leaders. Tinh replied that police and security officials from the provinces will receive special training from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). (Note: We have requested a meeting with the International Cooperation Department at MPS for a briefing on the MPS training; however we have yet to receive an appointment. End Note.)

...and a pilot project for Protestant registration.

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17. (SBU) Tinh asked Tran Minh Hung, the Deputy Director for Protestant Affairs to elaborate on the CRA's efforts to implement the registration of Protestant house-churches in the North. Hung stated that there are more than 100,000 Protestants live in the fourteen provinces in the region. Over ninety percent are ethnic H'mong, and almost all of the remainder are ethnic Dzao. On March 30-31, the CRA organized a conference with officials from all fourteen PPCs to explain the registration process. Each PPC is now charged with formulating an implementation plan. Between May and June, each province will also conduct seminars at the district and commune level to discuss these plans. Tinh clarified that the Embassy team will not be able to participate or observe any of these conferences.

18. (SBU) Hung stated that in addition to these general training sessions, the CRA has identified Lai Chau, Lao Cai and Ha Giang as pilot provinces for house-church registration. Lai Chau and Ha Giang have both agreed to register two ECVN congregations and Lao Cai has committed to registering another four. Under the program, all eight will be officially registered by the end of July. After the completion of these pilot registrations, the CRA will "analyze results and may generalize the implementation if successful." In addition to the CRA's program, Thai Nguyen and Bac Can provinces are implementing their own pilot registrations, with four congregations likely to be registered in Thai Nguyen and several more in Bac Can, Hung said. Poloff noted that there are over 1,000 ECVN house church congregations in the fourteen Northern provinces, and asked when we can expect more than just these preliminary eight to twelve registrations. Tinh replied that the CRA does not have enough resources to focus on more than three provinces at a time.

The EU confirms some of this in Lao Cai...

19. (SBU) On June 13, Poloff was briefed by French and EC poloffs on

the EU-troika's recent trip to Lao Cai, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien. (Note: The EU modeled their visit on Poloff's recent visit to Lao Cai and Ha Giang - REFS A and C - and it was closely coordinated with ECVN. End Note.) EC poloff stated that the Lao Cai PPC assured the EU team that the province is "making efforts to implement the new framework on religion", which include training for officials at the provincial, district and commune levels. In Bac Ha district, the District People's Committee (DPC) asserted that registration of Protestant groups under their jurisdiction remains difficult because it leads to conflict between traditional H'mong adherents and the new congregants. This is especially problematic because ancestor worship traditionally depends on land tenures in the region. "If tensions arise in the community we have to act," they said.

¶10. (SBU) In Ta Cu Ty commune in Bac Ha the EU team met with local officials who stated that the Protestant congregations in this majority H'Mong Christian area have not been allowed to register officially because they do not meet two requirements: 1) the groups did not form themselves properly, and 2) their leaders are illiterate and untrained. They also contradicted recent allegations from the ECVN that several villagers from the commune were recently detained. After an hour's hike to the village of Xin Chai, the EU asked the village headman to introduce them to the allegedly detained villagers. "After a long pause punctuated by an MPS officer speaking rapidly in H'mong," the man claimed that the individuals were in the village but "their houses were twenty kilometers distant." The EU assesses that the province was not prepared for their request to meet with Protestants in this village and they were not allowed to do so based on this and other thin excuses.

... and in Lai Chau, but not in Dien Bien.

¶11. (SBU) In Lai Chau, the PPC acknowledged to the EU delegation (and for the first time to anyone) that the province is home to 10,000 Protestants. They also acknowledged a small Catholic community, but claimed that there is no tradition of Catholicism in the province prior to 1954. To date, 69 Protestant house church congregations have applied for registration. The PPC is ready to register congregations but will only approve applications from groups that "contribute to social well-being," have a leader and have received formal approval from the central government. The Director of the Provincial Committee on Religion and Ethnic Minorities also told the EU that the provincial plan for registration requires each congregation to 1) consolidate their organization; 2) find a leader well versed in the doctrine of Protestant Christianity; and, 3) consolidate their application documentation. If a house church has achieved all three steps, it will then be permitted to contact ECVN in Hanoi to complete the process of establishing membership in the church. The French poloff

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asked how any congregation in this remote, poorly educated region could possibly satisfy any of these requirements, particularly finding a well-trained pastor, without ECVN assistance. The Director replied: "The provincial CRA will train the pastor about the religion and the process."

¶12. (SBU) The EU officers were permitted to visit two Protestant H'Mong villages in Lai Chau. The first, Cung Mu Phin village in Lam Nhi Tang Commune of Tam Duong District, was near the highway and only forty minutes from Lai Chau City. The village is a double hamlet with one half H'mong and the other Hoa (ethnic Chinese). Provincial officials allowed the EU to have a private meeting with the village headman who explained that the majority of H'mong residents are Protestants, including himself. They gather once a week in a house but their deacon does not live in the village. Officials later told the EU that if they returned on Sunday, they could meet the deacon and observe the congregation's services. The headman showed the EU two bibles - one published in Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) in the United States and the other of indeterminate origin published in H'mong language. The delegation was allowed to visit the home where the congregation gathers for worship and reported seeing a crude lectern, cross and benches. A picture clipped from a newspaper depicting DPM Vu Khoan meeting with ECVN

leaders in Hanoi appeared to have been hanging the wall for some time. The headman noted that the congregation had had problems with police harassment until 2003, but have not had any problems since then. An elderly Hoa man working in the fields who said he was not Christian told the delegation that economic conditions in the area have gotten worse over the years as the GVN has taken more and more land away from individuals.

¶13. (SBU) On the following day, the EU delegation visited the H'mong village of Pao Phang (#1) in Phin Ho Commune of Sin Ho district. The village was at the top of a mountain which was only accessible after a four-hour hike up a steep track. The members of the EU delegation who managed to make it to the village were greeted by the headman, commune chairman and a police official. The local leaders reiterated standard rural points to the delegation on economic and social development, for example "women are now equal and most don't marry before the age of eighteen or twenty." This was said as the thirteen year old wife of the police officer killed and cooked a chicken for the delegation while tending her two toddlers. At the EU's request, a Protestant who proved to be the brother of the headman was invited into the meeting to be interviewed. He proved ill-informed about Christian doctrine and could not even explain the significance of Christmas. He did, however, note that Protestantism is "less expensive" than traditional H'mong religious customs which is why he converted. (Note: Embassy Poloffs have heard this in other rural villages. The reasoning is that traditional H'mong religious practices require regular sacrifices of buffalo and other livestock, which can be a severe burden on impoverished families. End Note.) The man also explained that he travels on Sundays to another village for services conducted by a deacon who has traveled to visit ECVN in Hanoi. After the long trip to Pao Phang, the EU delegation did not have enough time to make their planned visit with the PPC in Dien Bien Phu in Dien Bien province on the last day of their trip.

ECVN adds some details on CRA plans...

¶14. (SBU) On June 14, Poloff and Pol Assistants met with ECVN General Secretary Pastor Au Quang Vinh. He reported that ECVN representatives last met with CRA on June 10. CRA told Vinh and the others about the eight congregation pilot program and asked ECVN to assist the GVN in the execution of its implementation plan by doing three things. First, the ECVN should suspend issuance of official applications to provincial governments on behalf of local congregations because the PPCs are "receiving too many applications." Vinh showed Embassy team a bundle of fifteen unopened application letters returned by the Ha Giang PPC that the CRA passed back to the ECVN at the meeting. (Note: Ha Giang claims that the letters were improperly addressed as there is no provincial "Committee on Religion and Ethnicity" and so returned them. End Note.) Second, CRA asked that pending the training of local officials and cadres in Protestant provinces ECVN should tell all house church congregations not to gather at places of worship. Believers should only worship at home for the time being. The registration process will be halted until after the training courses are completed. Finally, CRA requested ECVN's assistance in ascertaining whether applicant congregations are actually affiliated with ECVN or are more closely associated with other Christian groups that have proselytized in the area in the past. Vinh noted that since the Christian Missionary Alliance's efforts to change the allegiance of a number of house churches in the region several years ago, ECVN has been very careful to provide official credentials only to deacons of congregations with which they have a firm relationship.

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...confirms EU reporting...

¶15. (SBU) Poloff asked if the CRA told the ECVN that local officials will train house church pastors "about the religion and the process" as reported by the EU. Vinh said that ECVN has heard similar assertions from CRA and other officials. The Church recently raised strong objections to an article published in "Fatherland Magazine,"

a publication closely associated with the Vietnam Fatherland Front (the umbrella organization usually responsible for organizing such training) written by Dang Nghiem Van, a highly respected expert on provincial ethnic affairs, which perpetuated a number of myths about H'mong Protestantism. ECVN's most serious concern was that the article reiterated the common belief amongst local officials that the words "Vang Chu" are related to a Lao-based militant sect. ECVN states that Vang Chu is just the H'mong word for God and is used synonymously with Jesus Christ in Protestant H'mong services. Protestants, thus, have no relationship with Vang Chu insurgent groups. If this is the kind of thing the CRA and the provincial cadres will teach, it will hopelessly confuse local officials and Protestants, Vinh said.

...and provides an update on ECVN activities and outlook.

¶16. (SBU) Vinh stated that ECVN has added forty-three ethnic minority congregations since the beginning of 2006 for a new total of 1,070 house churches in the North. Two thirds of these have applied to register but none have received permission to do so yet. Of the remaining third, some are waiting to gauge local authorities' response to other applications before submitting their own. More congregations (around 140) believe that they have no need to register as they are able to worship as the please without harassment now. The small remainder has not applied because of "technical and logistical problems," he said.

¶17. (SBU) In sum, Vinh stated that conditions for Protestants are not getting worse in the North, but are not getting better. ECVN is not aware of any new police harassment or arrests of believers. Vinh theorized that local officials are "waiting for something to happen" before they move forward (or backward) on registration. He also said that it is not yet clear if the CRA's program in the North will be as strong and as successful as their earlier efforts in the central highlands. Nevertheless, ECVN is optimistic that sooner or later the GVN will have to recognize congregations across the North, especially "now that Vietnam has entered the WTO," Vinh said.

Comment

¶18. (SBU) It is clear that the GVN has developed some kind of implementation plan to begin registration of Protestant congregations in the North, but the eight to twelve house churches that they expect to register by the end of the July is disappointingly few. It is also worrying that the CRA has asked ECVN to delay submission of applications for bureaucratic reasons as well as to keep from assisting congregations in the process generally, but this may be a good-faith effort to allow the CRA to facilitate progress while preventing individual provinces from obstructing the process. Most disconcerting is the EU and ECVN report that CRA and provincial officials expect that they will have primary responsibility for training local religious leaders about their own beliefs. We are hopeful that the ECVN, and the Embassy, will succeed in convincing the CRA that religious organizations need to be able to train their own clergy and to assist their own congregations to rapidly organize, register and serve the needs of believers. A visit from Ambassador Hanford would help reinforce this message, and let the GVN know that a minimalist solution alone is not sufficient. The GVN will have to convince the international community that its first steps in the Northwest highlands are just the beginning of a campaign to provide real religious freedom.

BOARDMAN